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ENVIRONMENTAL Fact Sheet



Swift Creek Asbestos Site, Whatcom County, Washington

U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, Region 10

February 2007

Naturally occurring asbestos in Swift Creek dredge piles could pose health risk

Last summer EPA collected air samples to see if asbestos in the piles of dredged materials along Swift Creek could get into the air when disturbed. The results show that asbestos fibers can get into the air at levels that could pose a health risk during activities such as raking, shoveling, jogging, and bicycling. The risk of developing health problems depends on many factors, including:

- The amount of asbestos a person is exposed to;
- How often they are exposed;
- The type of activity;
- Their age when they are first exposed.

Limit your exposure to Swift Creek sediments

Naturally occurring asbestos is not a problem if left alone and undisturbed where people cannot breathe the fibers into their lungs. Being exposed to asbestos does not mean you will develop health problems. Many factors determine whether you are at risk, and it can take years, or decades, before a person develops symptoms of asbestos-related disease. To reduce your risk, it is important to limit your exposure:

- Do not remove material from the dredge piles for personal or commercial use, such as fill material;
- Do not use the dredge pile areas for recreation.

Next steps

Federal, state, and local agencies are currently working together to:

1. Determine what human health and environmental assessment work is still needed and how soon it can begin;
2. Find a short-term solution that will allow Whatcom County Public Works to dredge Swift Creek this summer to prevent flooding next fall and winter;
3. Develop a safe, long-term solution for flood control and management of dredged sediments from Swift Creek.

Frequently Asked Questions

How did the asbestos get into Swift Creek?

A massive landslide in the upper watershed of Sumas Mountain deposits as much as 120,000 cubic yards of sediment into Swift Creek each year. The slide material contains naturally occurring deposits of asbestos.

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Frequently Asked Questions *continued*

How much is considered a safe level of asbestos?

Exactly how much asbestos can cause illness is not known. Most of us have some asbestos fibers in our lungs as a result of its use in everyday industrial products. The following factors all play a role in whether or not a person may develop health problems:

- How much asbestos they are exposed to;
- How long the exposure lasts;
- How often they are exposed;
- How long since the first exposure;
- Smoking history;
- Pre-existing lung conditions.

What are the possible health effects from exposure to asbestos?

Breathing asbestos fibers can lead to thickening and scarring of the lungs, resulting in impaired breathing. It can also increase your risk of developing lung cancer, or a type of cancer that affects the lining of the lungs called mesothelioma. It can take years, even decades, before a person may develop symptoms of asbestos-related disease. Cigarette smoking combined with exposure to asbestos greatly increases a person's likelihood of developing lung cancer.

Should I contact my doctor if I have been exposed to this material?

If you are concerned about past exposures to the asbestos in dredged materials, you should talk with your family doctor.

How will this affect flood control in Swift Creek?

In past years, Whatcom County Public Works has dredged Swift Creek during the summer to prevent flooding of nearby farmland and access roads. Stockpile areas along the creek have reached full capacity for dredged materials. EPA and other government agencies are assisting Whatcom County in developing options for flood control on Swift Creek.

Have asbestos-related diseases been reported in this area?

The Washington Department of Health is reviewing historical data to find out whether any cases of asbestos-related disease have been documented. However, asbestos is a known human carcinogen, and it is important to take steps to prevent further exposures to people.

More information?

If you have questions or want more information, contact:

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For health-related questions, contact:

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If you have removed dredged material from this site in the past, contact:

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If you need materials in an alternative format, please contact Denise Baker-Kircher. TTY users, please call the Federal Relay Service: 800-877-8339



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